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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a problem of educational equity in the British educational system. Specifically, the document focuses on a group of working class white male students who undermine school authority, promote social class entrapment, and essentially disqualify themselves from educational opportunities. Increasingly, British public secondary schools are unable to graduate poor and working class students. Many of those who do graduate choose not to pursue further education. Research suggests that many of such students actively and consciously participate in self-induction into the culture of manual labor and disadvantaged entrapment that is irreversible for most of them. The students construct a dichotomy between manual labor, which they value highly and equate with masculinity, and mental labor, which they reject and associate with femininity. Underlying the conflict are larger global economic factors including: (1) the shift from an industrial to an information based global economy, which the education system is not mirroring; (2) the inability of education to provide students with the skills they need in a rapidly changing economy; (3) lack of certainty that a British high school diploma will mean employment; and (4) the inability of the class based British educational system to minimize conflict between the academic culture and the working class culture. Great Britain must address the factors that keep many of its students from pursuing postsecondary education if it hopes to maintain a leading place in the global economy. The British educational system must find ways of accommodating students who are dissatisfied with the ways in which schools are presently constituted. Further research is necessary to identify the numbers of students who reject higher education as well as those working class youths who choose to pursue further learning. The educational equity issue is not one that is limited to Great Britain. (SG)

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EQUITY ISSUES IN THE MULTICULTURAL BRITISH EDUCATION SYSTEM: FOCUS ON A GROUP OF WORKING CLASS STUDENTS THAT REJECT THE LIMITED EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss a problem of equity in the British educational system as it pertains to a group of working class students. This equity issue deals with a group of working class white male students of the counter-school culture who subvert the authority of schools while taking an active role in the process of social class entrapment and self-disqualification from educational opportunities (Willis, 1977).

Willis points out that one of the equity problems confronting British educators today is the fact that the very working class students who need education, and who have been the targets of liberal educational reforms for access to schooling, reject education and the idea of upward mobility through the educational system.

The issue of unsatisfactory educational outcomes for working class and non-dominant cultural groups is, in general, a global problem that is becoming prevalent in public high schools in industrial cities and towns as the twentieth century draws to a close. In other words, this is a world-wide problem which is not restricted to Britain (Yates, 1987; Willis, 1977). However, it is important to emphasize that, among the leading industrialized nations, this problem is more chronic in the British educational system (Frankel, 1992).

For the most part, public high schools in Britain, like their counterparts elsewhere, are increasingly unable to

graduate their students from poor and working class backgrounds, and among those students who do graduate, many are choosing not to continue with their post-secondary education. According to Yates (1987, p. 199) in 1981 only 22.4 percent of the relevant cohort graduating from high school in Britain entered higher education. The corresponding figure for the USA for the same year was 42.8 percent. In spite of the increasing global demands for job skills that require post-secondary education, the majority of British youth leave school permanently upon graduation from high school (Frankel, 1992).

Historical Overview

In educational literature, the analysis focusing on this equity issue concerning the education of disaffected working class youth of the counter-school culture is relatively new. Researchers began in the 1970s and 1980s to discuss the role schools play in the education of this group. In particular, this debate was initiated by Bowles and Gintis (1976) who provided a neo-Marxian critique of schools as institutions that reproduce the social class structure and social inequalities by providing unequal educational outcomes between and among students from upper, middle, and working class social backgrounds.

Since then, the works of Bowles and Gintis have been severely criticized for lack of empirical data on how the schools actually reproduce the social class structure among

students, and how the students respond to the way the schools reproduce them. As such, the works of Bowles and Gintis were depicted as functionalist research that neglected to incorporate the emic perspectives of the students, and how they view their experiences in the educational system.

In spite of this critique, the works of Bowles and Gintis produced positive results. Researchers in Britain and the United States, in following Bowles and Gintis, conducted ethnographic studies that attempted to provide the emic perspectives of the working class students that Bowles and Gintis didn't provide (Willis, 1977; Yates, 1987; McLeod, 1978).

The Nature of Counter-School Culture in Britain

Willis's *Learning to Labor* was one of the first monograph in this genre of research, and is considered to be a classic in the field of ethnographic research pertaining to British working class high school students. Willis conducted his study at a working class high school in an industrial town in the midlands of Britain. He found that the working class students at this school consisted of two groups, namely the "lads" and the conformist "ear'oles."[1] According to Willis, the "lads" are rebellious working class students who subvert the authority of the schools, while the "ear'oles" are working class students who believe in the official ideology of the schools about hard work and upward mobility through the educational system.

Willis's study focused on the "lads" - the non-conformist students, and how they culturally construct meaning about their experiences in school. He maintains that there is a strong sense of human agency among the "lads" and that the schools and the capitalist system of production do not single-handedly reproduce the working class students as manual laborers. The "lads," according to Willis, actively and consciously take part in the process of self-induction into the shop floor culture of manual labor and disadvantaged entrapment which is irreversible for most of them. Willis notes that the disruptive, inappropriate, and non-conformist behavior of the "lads" represents a form of resistance against the dominant culture of the middle and upper classes promoted in the schools.

According to Willis's analysis, the resistance of the "lads" makes a partial penetration into the system that they consider to be oppressive. However, Willis suggests that the "lads'" resistance partially consist of a lack of understanding. This lack of understanding enables the "lads" to adopt the values and attributes associated with their oppression and future careers in low paying and meaningless manual jobs.

The students of the counter-school culture construct a dichotomy between mental and manual labor. Manual labor is valued and associated with masculinity. Mental labor is devalued and associated with femininity and schooling, and ultimately rejected. In opposition to what the schools stand

for, the "lads" adopt what they consider to be the behaviors of the working class adult life such as drinking, going out with girls, smoking, "having a laff," stealing, and withdrawal from any serious academic pursuits while in high school. In fact, among the "lads" academic failure is considered to be a virtue which is juxtaposed to the emphasis of teachers and educators on hard work and academic success. These students have a negative assessment of the role of schooling and the promise of education in their lives. One of the students of the British counter-school culture has this to say about the role of schools:

> Joey: I don't think school does fucking anything to you... It never has had much effect on anybody I don't think [after] you've learnt the basics. I mean school, it's fucking four hours a day. But it ain't the teachers who mould you, it's the fucking kids you meet. You'm only with teachers 30 per cent of the time in school, the other fucking two-thirds are just talking, fucking pickin' an argument, messing about (Willis, 1977, p. 26).

This negative appraisal of the promise of education is not limited to the British students at the high school Willis studied. In the United States, for example, students from comparable social class backgrounds are providing similar voices carrying a negative appraisal of education. One of the students in McLeod's (1987) study makes this observation about education which carries even a harsher tone and sense of frustration:

> Frankie: They dropped out of school, and they got better fucking jobs than we do. I got my fuckin' diploma, and I ain't got jack shit. Look how many fucking college graduates ain't got jobs... They got educations. What

> the fuck they doin' with it? They ain't doin' shit. So fucking school ain't paying off for no one (p. 104).

It is important to note that this equity issue concerning a group of British working class students who reject education is related to a host of factors pertaining to the relationship between the schools and the changes taking place in the global economy of which Britain is a part. A full discussion of these dynamics is beyond the purview of this short article. However, some of these factors include, but are not limited to, the following: 1) in the shift from the industrial era to an information-based global economy, society is changing rapidly while there is a lack of corresponding change in the educational system; 2) the educational system remains unable to provide the students the necessary skills needed in the rapidly changing economy; 3) in spite of the increased demands for skilled labor, young people in British schools are not confident that the attainment of a high school diploma is a guarantee of gainful employment upon graduation; and 4) the British education system, with its long history of close connection to the social class structure, has not found ways to minimize the clashes between its academic culture and the culture of the working class non-conformist students.

Summary and Conclusion

For the educators who promote equal opportunity for all students in education, the rejection and negative appraisal

of schooling by the students of counter-school culture present major challenges in the realm of equity. This is indeed the case especially when the very British students who need education reject the limited educational opportunities available to them. This equity issue is likely to prevail in the decades to come unless there is an increasing fit between the cultural process of schooling and the provision of skills needed in the economy of the twenty-first century.

Unless there is an increasing number of British students graduating from high school and enrolling in post-secondary schools of any type, Britain will continue to fall behind other advanced capitalist states in the number of skilled laborers which are so much needed in the emerging post-industrial information society. The condition of a less skilled work force will have a negative impact on the capability of Britain to compete economically within the new global realities presented by the emerging post-industrial information society (Frankel, 1992).

In addition, working class students such as Willis's "lads" will continue to have a negative appraisal of education if changes are not made to enable the British educational system to find better ways of accommodating the cultures of the working class and other students who are dissatisfied with schools as they are presently constituted. After all, it is not only groups of working class youth who are dissatisfied with the British educational system. As Yates points out, in Britain both the upper class and the

working class are generally anti-intellectual and disinterested in education. In this regard, Bernstein (1975) suggests that in Britain it is the new middle class, a group whose income does not come from the ownership of property, that values education because the attainment of educational credentials and skills are essential to the reproduction of this group.

Further research is needed to determine the size of this group of working class students who reject education across the entire United Kingdom. So far, studies have not been conducted on this issue, except that some works have pointed out that in Britain students of the counter-school culture exist in all racial, ethnic, and diverse cultural groups such as the West Indians, Pakistanis, English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, and others (Willis, 1977; Yates, 1987). Students of the counter-school culture in Britain also can be found among subcultures of working class girls (McRobbie, 1978, 1976; Willis, 1977).

Finally, useful insights into the education of the dissatisfied working class youth could be gained by conducting studies on those working class conformist students who seem to have cut a niche for themselves on how to survive and complete their high school in the British educational system. The promotion of equity and equal opportunities in education for working class youth is a worthwhile endeavor. New approaches and solutions are needed to address this dilemma of students who reject education when they truly need

to take advantage of the limited educational opportunities available to them. After all, this equity issue presents a challenge to all concerned educators world-wide, and, therefore, it is not a problem which is restricted to Britain.

Footnote

1. Willis (1977) provides a unique description of the term "ear'ole", and I would like to quote him here. According to Willis

> the term 'ear'ole' itself connotes the passivity and absurdity of the school conformists for 'the lads.' It seems that they are always listening, never doing: never animated with their own internal life, but formless in rigid reception. The ear is one of the least expressive organs of the body: it responds to the expressivity of others. It is pasty and easy to render obscene. This is how 'the lads' liked to picture those who conformed to the official idea of schooling (p. 14).

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